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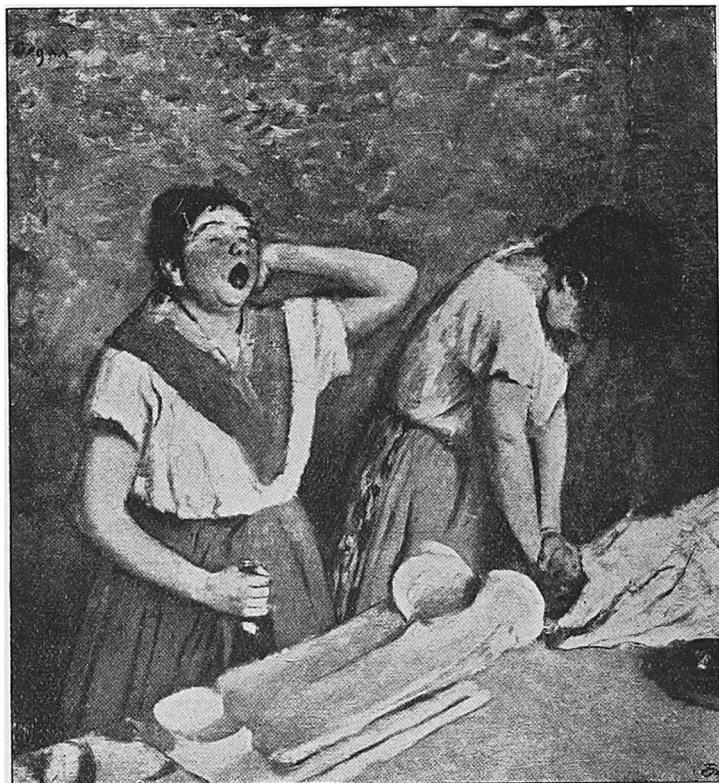
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*THE LAUNDRESSES
BY DEGAS*

D EGAS BY PROF. MAX LIEBER- MANN, TRANSLATED BY ADRIAN STOKES

WITH a light-heartedness, not even to be excused on the plea of youth, I accepted the invitation of an Art Journal to write a few lines about Degas. I thought that conviction makes the speaker and that common-sense and comprehension, with little Art, will speak for themselves. I also remembered Fontaine's words, 'The dullest cow always finds the right grass.'

But very soon I discovered that the thing is not so easy after all, and that I had not done enough justice to my new colleagues, the gentlemen of the pen.

I believe, too, that there is hardly an artist whose ways are so difficult to put into words, as

those of Degas. The qualities of Menzel, for instance, could be proved mathematically : his mastery in conquering materials ; his infinite Art to achieve the utmost success in any technique, woodcut, lithography, pen and ink, or pencil ; the genius with which he represented for us the time of Frederick the Great, which he did on a space of five inches—the illustrations of the great King were not allowed to exceed that size—his biting wit and the merciless truth with which he represents man, animals, and landscape ; his great knowledge and his great industry.

Of all this we find nothing in Degas. He is not to be approached by reason. His is an

DEGAS

entirely sensuous Art which one cannot understand but only feel. Nothing positive—only suggestion.

According to Academic notions he can neither paint nor draw; instead of deep philosophical ideas he portrays the life of modistes, dancers, jockeys.

Nor does he possess any official certificate of greatness. He has neither title nor order, and the only one ever offered to him, the Legion of Honour, he refused. He cannot, like the late Meissonier, or the still living (though long dead) Gérôme, prove his immortality by membership of the Academy, the forty being, as is well known, immortal. Only two years ago the Academicians begged the French minister not to buy work by Degas for the Luxembourg Museum. And in spite of all this there is no living master for whose pictures higher prices are paid than for those of Degas. In New York, in London, in Paris, and now at last in Berlin, amateurs compete keenly for his works, which is marvellous, for never painter occupied himself less with the sale of his pictures.

There was never anything in his work which could be called charming, beautiful, or executed; but one thing there is which compensates us fully for the lack of these qualities and that is an eminent personality. Goethe says in his talks with Chancellor von Müller, 'Nature is a goose—one must make her into something.'

What we have passed a thousand times without notice Degas shows to us. He finds gold in the street. All with him is intuition, hence the striking impression.

His pictures seem grown quite by chance—not made. They have nothing of cold calculation. Each one of his pictures seems to be his first, so tentative, so seemingly awkward are they. They are in the manner of no other master, without any kind of 'chic,' simple, unadorned Nature, as Degas sees her.

It is the merit of the impressionists, Manet at their head, once again to approach things without prejudice. Instead of Academic receipt for half-tone, light and shadow, they try to mix each tone on their palette as they see it, and so put it on the canvas. The rules of the School say, light is cold, shadow warm, but the impressionist just whistles and paints shadows, red, violet, or green, how and as he sees them.

This deed, simple and natural as the story of Columbus and the egg, caused a revolution, and I must confess that when for the first time I saw an impressionist picture, twenty-five years ago, I could make nothing of it. I had to learn to see as one has to learn to hear a passage from Beethoven. The unmusical will certainly never learn it.

From childhood up our eyes are wrongly trained. Instead of seeing Nature in pictures we see pictures in Nature. When looking at a Swiss lake you will hear people say, 'A real Calame,' or if at Ostend 'quite like Achenbach,' or of a ham they will say 'No painter could paint a more beautiful one.' Manet once noticed a crowd in an exhibition before a picture by that great favourite of the public, Fortuny. Small as an octavo page it contained a thousand figures, whose finger-nails even were visible. Manet wittily exclaimed '*et dire que c'est fait à la main.*' The Philistine sees in a picture only the tricks of Art, not the work of Art; only the technique, for of the feeling he understands nothing.

It was high time that the impressionists returned to Nature—the cradle of all new development in Art.

Already thirty years ago the Barbizon school certainly studied Nature with the utmost piety, but even Millet, its most advanced representative, followed faithfully the tradition of the old Dutch school in his manner of painting. It was left to the impressionist to put the new wine into new bottles.

It goes without saying that Degas, on his *début* thirty years ago, was received with derision, as everything new in Art is at first always laughed at. The boor eats only what he knows and the public likes the soup it has been used to for years. Naturally, academic artists, patronised by the State, and grown to be a sort of Art police, were shocked by Degas's impertinent, mocking way of painting.

In itself the word 'academic' is no insult, but by degrees we come to know through whose fault it is that no artist who respects himself likes to be called academic. Although all are or should be so, still the word 'academic' now means *passe*.

In olden days, apprentices entered the workshops of men like Raphael or Rembrandt. Those were their masters. Later the work-



THE PEDICURE
BY DEGAS

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DEGAS AND INGRES



BALLET DANCERS
BY DEGAS

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shops developed into academies, but I think that not always Raphaels or Rembrandts teach in them.

Degas sprang from the Academic school, and one knows that he esteems Ingres beyond all artists. Superficially there is no resemblance between them : deep down they have much in common. Degas is as great a draughtsman as Ingres, if we understand by drawing the life-like rendering of the characteristics of Nature. Ingres' portrait of M. Bertin, although told in the formal language of the Academy, is as full of life in its simple truthfulness as Count Lepic with his two daughters, or Desboutin by Degas. The drawing of Degas is astonishing, sometimes approaching caricature (he is akin to the great caricaturist Daumier) and always it hits the nail on the head. He invariably scorns the beautiful stroke or writing master's flourish.

His colour is as his drawing—simple, proud, and of an aristocratic distinction. His palette is

the simplest imaginable. Sometimes a picture of his is only black and white, relieved by the pink shoe or sash of a dancing girl.

Whistler also paints, sometimes, harmonies in black and white, but with him one feels intention, *parti pris*, the cult of the precious. With Degas all seems to have come of itself.

And then : his feeling for space. He not only composes in a space, but with space. The distance from one object to another often makes his composition. There are no lines, but, as in Nature, spots of light and dark.

In spite of this he never loses the character of his subject. In contrast to Manet, who only saw a piece of Nature through his temperament, Degas paints pictures. To him, character is quite as important as to the German genre painters, but these, even the best of them, such as Waldmüller or Knaus, draw each figure as characteristically as possible, and then compose the single figures into a whole which they after-

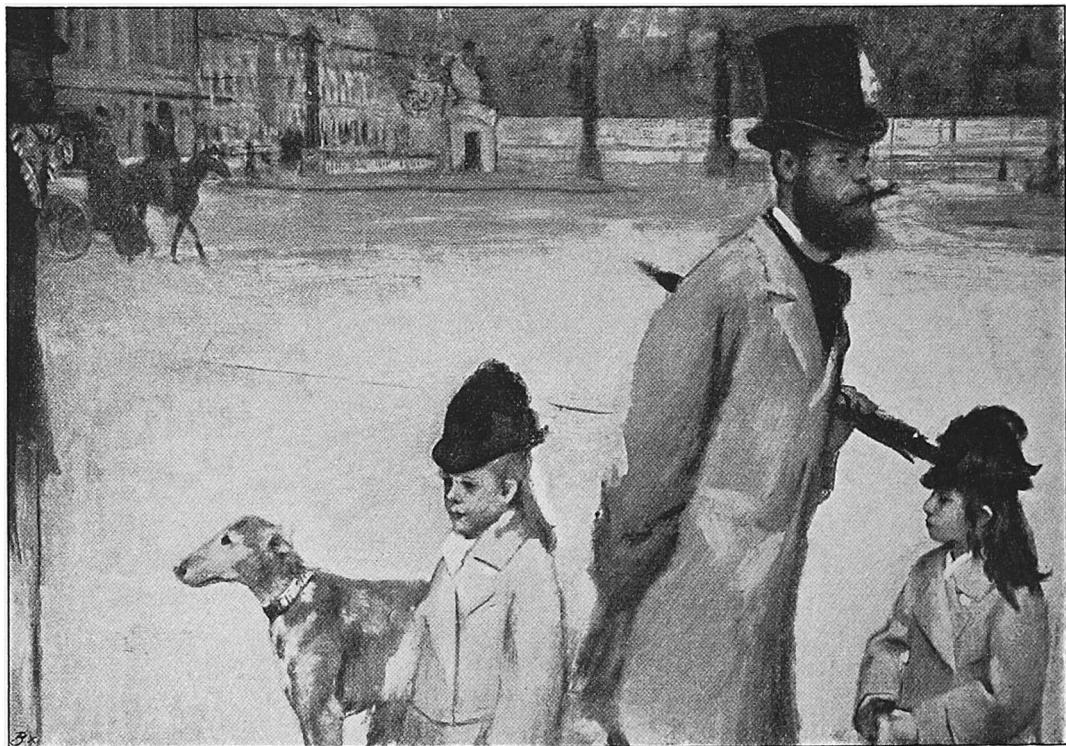
HIS COMPOSITION

wards tint, more or less pleasantly. Sometimes they succeed in giving extremely true types (remember the old Jew by Knaus), but the ensemble is evidently composed.

Degas's pictures look at first sight like instantaneous photographs. Their composition is so good that it is not evident. He seems to have seen the complete picture in Nature, and to have observed the scene he renders. One look, for instance, at *The Pedicure*. The scene is as drastic as possible—also the pose of the man cutting the girl's corns. The grouping of the two figures is natural and unstudied as a photograph taken at haphazard, while they sit there together. If we look closer we discover, under the apparently instantaneous exposure, the highest art of composition. How, for instance, the bald head of the man, as highest light, and the dark hair of the girl, as deepest dark, just have their places in the picture where they are decoratively needed. There is nothing more of conventional accessory. Each detail, the flowered

sofa, the chair with the bath towel, is just as necessary for the character of the action as for the effect of the picture. The literary essence is entirely translated into form and colour, and, without any loss of strength, the trivial motive is shaped into a work of art which reminds one of Velasquez by its wonderful division of light and dark as well as its colour. *C'est une fête pour les yeux*. It is what, using an academic expression, one may call *la mise en toile* of the decorative ensemble of an Utamaro.

From far away one can recognise a Degas by the original way in which he cuts Nature. Courageously he shows, here only the head, there only the hind legs of a racehorse. Suddenly he cuts the podium of a scene with a 'cello, and this with so much feeling of certainty that we think it had to be so and could not be otherwise. Sometimes he puts his horizon quite high up in a picture to be able to show the feet of a ballet girl—without consideration for the golden rule, *aurea seorsim*. Sometimes he shows his models in



THE PROMENADE
BY DEGAS

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A BALLET DANCER
BY DEGAS

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the most impossible positions—entering the bath, as they dress, undress, or dry themselves ; and all with the naïveté with which an innocent young girl is able to speak of the most delicate subjects.

The Art of Degas is either naïve or so great that it appears to be naïve. He proudly despises any kind of virtuosity, any bragging of knowledge. His execution is timid and chaste. What he has to say, he says simply without unnecessary phrases. He works with the same artistic earnestness as Menzel, drawing indefatigably from Nature until he has found the characteristic pose. In the picture he gives an extract only, suppressing all that is unnecessary, always simplifying until nothing of the mere model is left.

By no modern painter is literary interest so entirely eliminated as by Degas.

To be truthful we must confess that sometimes the effect is unpleasant. There is nothing

of the sympathy with which Rembrandt painted ; on the contrary Degas seems to despise his models. In the half-grown ballet girl he shows already the future prostitute. He is like Nature, merciless, coldly sceptical. The foundation of his own nature is pride, and what he has of tender feeling he hides. He fears cynicism less than sentiment.

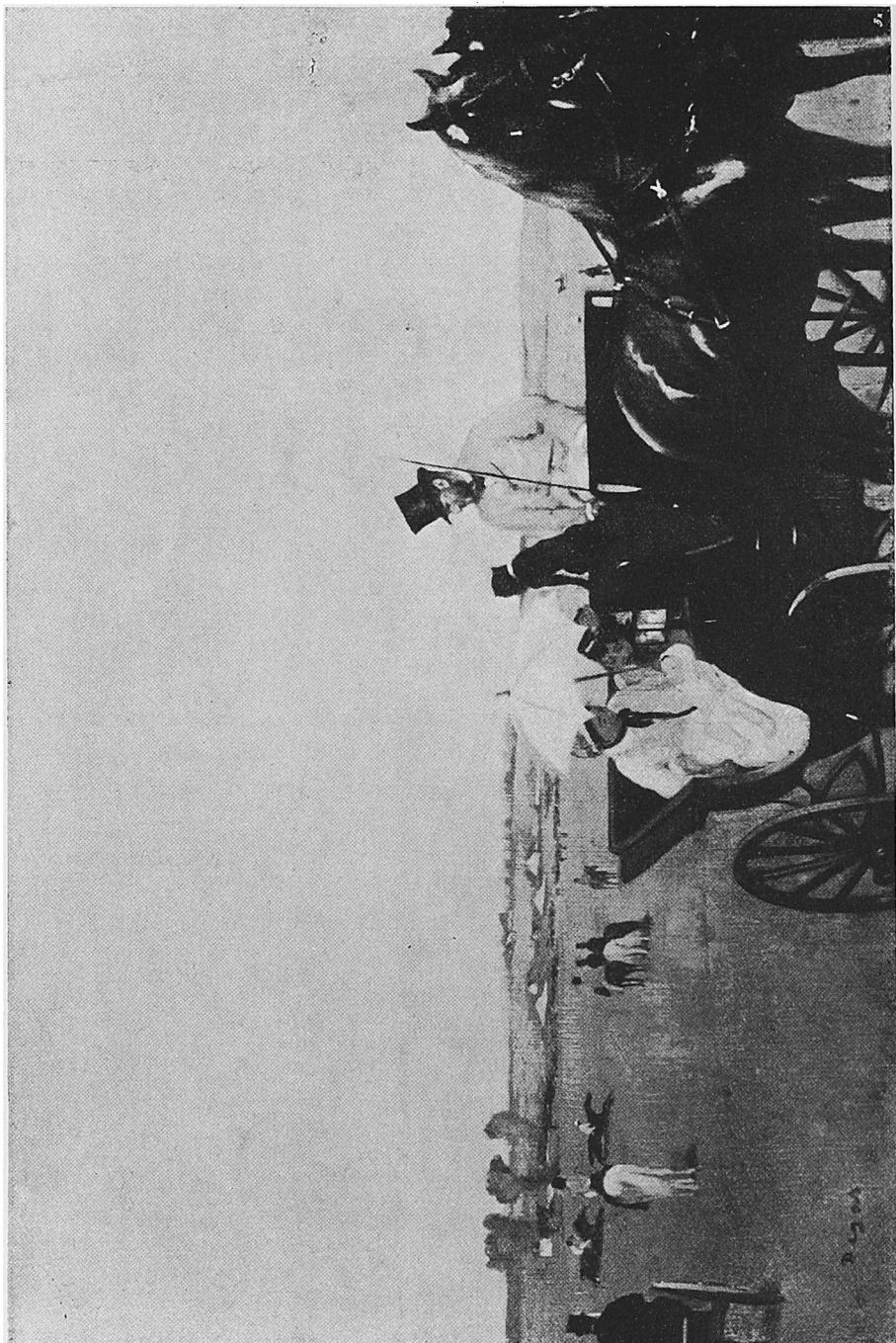
From all this one sees that his Art is not ingratiating, but nevertheless we come under the spell of his colossal individuality. Whether or not that pleases us is a question of taste—or fashion.

As Wagner forced himself to the front and every musician has to take account of him, so Degas has become a force with which every painter consciously, or unconsciously, has to reckon. He can no longer be ignored.

That the elder French school disapproves of Degas is quite as natural as the coldness felt for him by our older generation in Germany.

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**ON THE RACECOURSE
BY DEGAS**



THE ARTIST

When Menzel, fifteen years ago, saw a splendid collection of impressionist pictures he exclaimed "did you really give money for that rubbish!" The same Menzel, who in his youth, in his *Garden of Prince Albrecht*, in his landscape of Schönberg with the railway, in his picture of 1848, in his *Opera Ball*, tried to solve the same problems that the impressionists do now. This only proves that Menzel, when he spoke thus, was a matured artist who could, or would, not go further on the road he had once chosen. No person can jump over his shadow, and one remembers Goethe's antipathy for the romantic school and the genius of Kleist.

Old Schadow, who in his time filled a position equivalent to that of Menzel in ours, wrote sixty years ago when Menzel's book on Frederick the Great appeared, "The scribblings of a certain Menzel are unworthy of the great king." Still, sixty years later, Menzel received, and well deserved, the order of the black eagle for glorification of the deeds of the great king.

Schadow could not understand Menzel, as Menzel cannot appreciate Degas. In Degas is (as there was in Menzel) something new, which remains foreign to an earlier generation. All

novelty in Art, at least in our democratic time, has to conquer two generations, the older and the new, before it can prosper. The older no longer follows, the present does not yet.

Degas can never become popular. He seems even to avoid popular success. He works only for a few gourmets, hating the trivial taste of the great majority, a proud lonely one, of jealous egoisms, not for success, but for his art.

Manet had, perhaps, more temperament, was more a pathfinder, but no one of all modern artists is more gifted than Degas, or more able to lead the new Art on the road discovered by Manet to the end of all Art—to style.

St. Augustin says that all that is sensuous or beautiful, whether produced by Nature or by artists' work, is beautiful through proportions of space or time—as, for instance, the living body and its movements; and, on the contrary, that unity, which is only comprehended by reason and, of which, through intervention of the senses, the bodily beauty is judged, moves neither in space nor in time.

If any modern painter has, certainly it is Degas, who has created works of Art mobile in space and time.

